



"There is a kind of victory in good work, no matter how humble."
—Jack Kemp

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The Pursuit of Excellence (Part Two)

In Part One, we saw that the Christian concept of excellence is far different from this world's idea of competitive superiority over others. The Bible's teaching does not include any notion of climbing over others to reach the top of one's field of endeavor. Instead, it speaks of doing the best we can with the gifts and abilities [God](#) has given, all to bring glory to Him.

Considering this further, we found that the Greek word *areté*, which can be translated as "excellence," really suggests attitudes and actions that are praiseworthy. This nuance of *areté* is connected with God's glory in [Isaiah 42:8](#), 12 and 43:21 (Septuagint), leading to the conclusion that the greatest excellency of all is the glorious nature of God, what He is really like, for which He deserves the highest praise. The Christian pursuit of excellence, then, deals with our growing in the glorious character of God.

Most translations of [II Peter 1:3-7](#) use the term "give all diligence" or "make every effort" in growing in or supporting the virtues that Peter discusses: virtue, knowledge, [self-control](#), perseverance, godliness, brotherly [kindness](#), and [love](#). However, the modern phrase, "do your very best," conveys a similar motivation. Besides, we all understand what it means to try to do the very best that we can.

As Solomon writes in [Ecclesiastes 9:10](#), "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or [wisdom](#) in the grave where you are going." In other words, it is important that we set our minds to do our very best in every activity we undertake, every word we speak, every plan we make. If it is a task worth doing, it is worth doing right and diligently.

Here are four points to focus on as we pursue excellence:

Point #1: We need to do our very best at knowing God.

[Jesus](#) tells us in [John 17:3](#) that the whole point of eternal life is to know God the Father and His Son. That is what the Christian life is all about. This means that we have to make it a priority to feed every day on the spiritual bread that God has prepared for us. The Bible is God's Word; it is the Book that reveals God to us, and we need to do our very best to know it cover to cover. This would also include daily prayer and living by His instructions.

Jesus says that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind ([Matthew 22:37-38](#)). In order to do this, we have to do our very best to know Him. We have probably heard the saying, "To know Him is to love Him." So if we are to love Him as Jesus said we should, we have to make the effort to get to know Him.

Point #2: We need to do our very best at being and doing good.

Jesus says that only God is good ([Matthew 19:17](#)). We also know that every good thing comes from God ([James 1:17](#)). In our pursuit of excellence, we need to emulate Him by being and doing good. Paul tells us in [Ephesians 2:10](#), "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." We need to make it a point to reach out and do good for others, as we are able. By doing this, we will be learning how to be good like God, and it will change our character to be more like His.

Point #3: We need to do our very best at knowing each other and developing friendships.

Solomon writes in [Proverbs 18:24](#), "A man who has friends must himself be friendly." On this, commentator Adam Clarke states, "If a man does not maintain a friendly carriage, he cannot expect to retain his friends." So we should not wait for someone else to make the first move. We should determine to make new friends, not just acquaintances. Peter mentions brotherly kindness in his list of virtues in I Peter 1. We need to exemplify it in our friendships.

Point #4: We need to do our very best at developing loving relationships within those friendships.

Again Adam Clarke writes, "Love begets love; and love requires love as its recompense. Friendship is a good plant; but it requires cultivation to make it grow." In our pursuit of excellence, the one virtue that supports all the others is the last one that Peter mentions in [II Peter 1:7](#): love. God is love ([I John 4:8](#), 16), and everything He does stems from love. If we are to emulate Him, then everything we do must also stem from godly love.

Remember the words of Jesus in [John 15:14](#), "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." At the same time, He gave us a new commandment that we should love each other in the same manner in which He loved us ([John 13:34](#)). It is an amazingly high standard of conduct, but it is an excellent goal to pursue.

In his autobiography, *Why Not the Best?*, former President Jimmy Carter relates his interview with Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, who asked how he had stood in his class at the Naval Academy:

I swelled my chest with pride and answered, "Sir, I stood 59th in a class of 820!" I sat back to wait for the congratulations. Instead came the question: "Did you do your best?" I started to say, "Yes, sir," but I remembered who this was. I gulped and admitted, "No, sir, I didn't always do my best." He looked at me for a long time, and then asked one final question, which I have never been able to forget—or to answer. He said, "Why not?"

We certainly do not want to stand before our Savior and have Him ask us, "Why did you not do your best?" This is especially the case since He tells us in [II Peter 1:3](#) that His divine power has bestowed on us everything necessary for life and godliness through the rich knowledge of the One "who called us to His own glory and excellence" (English Standard Version). If we pursue the excellencies of God, doing our very best to put on the glorious nature of God through a deep relationship with Him and His people, we will be diligently ensuring our call and election ([II Peter 1:10](#)).

- Clyde Finklea

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

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by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Our freedoms have eroded as new laws, inspired by the leftist agenda, protect and safeguard immorality while taking liberties from the majority. To many, freedom has become the synonym for permissiveness, license, and antinomianism. Classical philosophers have continually warned that only virtuous people can remain free. Christ came to free us from the bondage to sin. After setting a spotless example for 33 years, He enabled us to follow this example by sending the Holy Spirit. Only when we have God's Spirit do we have the desire to conform to His standards and maintain freedom. Only by using the gift of God's Spirit can we gain the self-discipline, self-mastery, and self-control to put to death the carnal pulls that destroy us, giving us the freedom to walk in union with God.

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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